Isabelle

THE FIRST GREAT act of love I ever witnessed was Split Lip bathing his handicapped daughter. We were young, ignorant of mercy, and called her Boneless or Balled-Up Gumby for the way her limbs were twisted and useless. She looked like a newborn colt, appendages folded in as she lay on the velour couch protected by guardrails. Leo and I stood outside the window on cinder blocks, watching. She was scared of the tub, so to bathe her Split Lip covered the couch with a tarp and caught the runoff in a bucket. Mrs. Split Lip was long gone, unable to bear the work Boneless required. She found another man and together they made a little blond beauty they dressed in red velvet and paraded up and down the aisle at St. Caspian's while Split Lip held Boneless against him in the last pew, shushing her whenever the music overcame her and she started making horrible moaning noises trying to sing along.

Maintaining Boneless cost plenty. Split Lip's main job was cop but on the side he sold water purifiers. When the neighborhood changed, the purifier business went belly-up. Split Lip said the niggers didn't care what kind of poison they put in their bodies. Truth was, the purifiers were a scam. Inside was a sponge and an electric motor connected to nothing. But without the purifier money he couldn't afford the masseuse who eased Boneless's bad pain and couldn't afford to have Mrs. Cavendish in. So before leaving for work he'd put Boneless on the floor with a water bottle and her lunch and a picture book. Halfway through his shift he'd call home and she'd jerk the phone to the floor by the cord and make a certain sound that meant she was fine. In her simple way she understood poverty and never asked him to leave work, and time and again he came home to find her shivering on the floor in soiled pants.

By this time the panic-sell was in full bloom. Old Poles and Czechs were losing their asses and leaving treasured flower gardens behind in a frenzy. Local industries failed left and right. The stockyard downscaled and Dad was reduced to pushing a gutcart for minimum. Even the nuns went racist after the convent was reappraised and it seemed their pension fund was in jeopardy. Dad resolved to sell. But it was too late. The moment was past. A big loss was in the cards. The realtor came over and said ten thou. Dad sat looking at him.

"I pour my life's blood into this place," he said, "and you offer me half what I paid?"

"Market forces at work," the realtor said. "But all right, all right. Call me a saint walking the face of the earth: ten thousand five."

"Get out," Dad said.

"Fine," the realtor said. "Live among the savages forever if you want."

"What's happening to me is a goddamned shame," Dad said, and threw a scratch pad at him.

"Agreed," the realtor said. "But don't blame me. Blame the spades."

Then it was spring, and flowers bloomed in the park.

Then it was summer and the lagoon scummed over and race riots broke out and tear gas blew over the trees as Leo and I fished for carp.

One day in June, Split Lip came into the clearing leading a black teen by the ear. We squatted in the reeds. Officer Doyle nudged the teen's little brother with his billy club. We knew the little brother. He was Norris Crane. He played cornet with me in school, in Amazing Marching Falcons. He was an altar boy whose skin tore like paper. The nuns said that because of his affliction he didn't have to kneel through Stations but he did anyway and offered it up to the Lord whenever he bled through his pants.

Officer Doyle said let's interrogate. Split Lip said I'll show you interrogation. He pushed the teen into the lagoon and held him under. With his club Doyle made Norris watch. The teen's hands slapped and slapped. Then Split Lip stood up and the dead teen floated.

Now that's interrogation, Doyle said.

Split Lip said to Norris: Tell a soul and I'll take it out on your fat-butt mom in a heartbeat.

We ran home crying. Dad said shut our mouths about it forever. Ma said pray continually and try to forget. But who could forget? Every day on the way to school we saw Norris outside Spritzer's, becoming the world's youngest

wino. Old lady Spritzer sold to anybody. She was a bitter crone with a thick mustache and big arm veins who'd lost two sons to the Koreans and one to an aging Rush Street queen who brought him back by the neighborhood on weekends in a tremendous purple Lincoln. We'd see Norris puking into the sewer while talking nonsense about the blood of the Lamb and vowing in his high-pitched voice to waste Split Lip. Who would have believed him? He was twelve. He was a sweetheart who in biology had hired Earl Dimps to carve up his fetal pig. Every Halloween he came to school an Apostle and proudly placed his papier-mâché staff in the aisle. Dead brother or no dead brother, his was a kind heart that would never allow him to do anyone harm.

Or so we thought. Then he came up with a gun. He showed it to us behind the Dumpster where Hal Flutie had lost his arm to the crushing blade.

"I can't live with it anymore," he said. "I'll sneak in there this morning and wait all day for him to come home."

"You won't," Leo said.

"I will," said Norris. "Nine o'clock tonight he dies."

At ten to nine Leo and I walked in the odd autumnal dark to Split Lip's sagging home. From the stockyard we could hear the Czechs inducing cows into the deathhouse with tongue clicks. When the tongue clicks didn't work they ran out extension cords and used the prods. We mounted the cinder blocks. Inside, Split Lip was doing I'm a Little Teapot, making a handle of his left arm and a spout of his right. Boneless applauded by pounding her wrists together. Overcome with love, Split Lip gathered her up in his arms.

"My darling girl," he said. "We'll stay together forever and every day will be fun like this. Would you like that?"

"Yunh," Boneless said.

"Would you like that my honeylamb?" Split Lip said.

"Yunh," Boneless said.

Norris stepped out of the closet, a frail kid in sneakers. He raised his gun and Boneless began to wail.

"Please no," Split Lip said. "Who will care for my child?"

Norris paused, thinking, then blew his own brains out across the yellow wall.

We ran. We ran to the train tracks and lay on our backs, sick in our guts as the guiltless stars wheeled by. After no dance would we look up at them happily now. Norris's soul whizzed through the highgrass. Chills broke out on my arms.

The Cranes moved back to Mississippi without a trace, reduced to a family of daughters.

Dad went almost blind, and evenings I'd guide him home from the stockyards telling him what color the sky was. Then one night Ma came home from Trini's Market with a broken arm and no groceries. Dad said take one goddamned guess at the race of the guys who did this. Leo and I sat there in the kitchen with big eyes as Ma made fruit salad one-handed.

Sick with rage, Leo joined the Nazis. Dad wept and said nobody liked the jigs, but that was no reason to go off the deep end. The next summer Leo cracked one in the head with a ball bat and Dad said enlist quick before they throw your ass in the clink. Leo lied about his age and soon sent from Parris Island a postcard of a hick woman with missile breasts.

I'm so fucking lonely for you, man, he wrote. *Join up yourself and we'll go over and kick some ass together.*

But Dad had pledged me to Split Lip. They were old school pals. Since the shooting, Boneless had been a mess. Unless someone was there all the time she wept nonstop. Dad said that someone was to be me. By now he was a crazy blind guy stinking up the parlor. How was I supposed to tell him no?

So every morning I biked over and made her eggs and Split Lip went off to work, biting his lip in gratitude and offering me unlimited rides in his squad car. I came to care about her. She tried so hard. I read to her and taught her to type using a stick held between her teeth. I brushed her hair until it shone and made sure her smocks were clean.

Leo came home with a Baggie full of human ears and asked why was I wasting my life baby-sitting a tard. I said don't call her a tard. He said as long as I was being so pure, why not give her the real scoop on her old man? I said because it would crush her. Boo hoo, he said.

Finally Split Lip died in his sleep. Father Delacroix read aloud the eulogy Boneless wrote. People wept at the level of her devotion and her beautiful choice of words.

Leo sat next to me half-crocked, whispering: Murderer, murderer.

With Split Lip dead the maw of the state home gaped. There invalids were frostbitten in their beds and lunatic women became pregnant without known lovers. Dad begged Ma to take Boneless in. But Ma said: Look at you, look at me, look at our son who's got no life, let her go where she can get proper care.

So in she went. Holidays we visited. At Thanksgiving Leo came along wired on speed and while I was out fetch-

ing turkey slices from the Olds told her all. I came back in and Ma was wringing her hands like a nut in the corner and Dad had Leo by the throat, asking where in the hell he'd left his sense of decency.

Leo pushed him off and said: Lies serve nothing. The truth serves God.

Dad said: God my foot, you buttinsky, you've broken her heart.

She looked up at me so sweetly I couldn't lie.

Thus was God served: a sobbing girl in a wheelchair, photographs of a dead man gathered up and burned, a typing stick used less often as the months went by, finally the cessation of all typing and a request that I visit no more.

Months passed. Nights I sat home, hearing gunshots and cackling addicts in the alley, waiting for any hopeful thing to sprout in my heart. Finally I thought: What can she do, throw me out? So I went over. When she saw me her eyes lit up. She typed and I talked until the sun rose and the halls filled with oldsters and lunatics hacking and grousing their way into consciousness. Then an ex-con with a head scar brought her a dish of eggs that looked like it had spent the night on a windowsill and I thought: Jesus Christ, enough is enough.

By then I was selling the hell out of Buicks at night. So I got a little place of my own and moved her in with me. Now we're pals. Family. It's not perfect. Sometimes it's damn hard. But I look after her and she squeals with delight when I come home, and the sum total of sadness in the world is less than it would have been.

Her real name is Isabelle.

A pretty, pretty name.